

Harsh Grip

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Summary: A family wrecked by the loss of a son. A child torn from his home, conscripted into the Spartans. When he tried to escape life took a macabre twist. AU

1. I

Well it's been a long time since I've uploaded anything but here is my third story. I actually started writing this as two separate pieces of fiction, the first long before I even began Prisoner of War. It is a little different and fragmented because I've written it over such a long amount of time. Also I feel I must note this is set in an alternative universe, it is my first story concerning the Spartans directly but is not an actual account of what happens (you'll see what I mean in the third chapter). Some may not like the themes shown throughout but there will always be those who resist orders.

Harsh Grip

The waning sun hid behind the thunderous clouds high above. Heavy rain fell upon all below the unearthly sky, the dim light streaked with intense flashes of lightning, the boom echoing out upon the wide valley.

Nestled closely together, a small village lay in the heart of this monstrous storm, the low, squat buildings built for such downpours, yet the slate grey roofs seemed to sag under the constant rain and depression.

Another vein of fire ripped down the sky, a lone silhouette outlined high in the heavens, a tiny blip compared to the rolling clouds above it. The spot moved wildly in the ferocious winds, plunging downward like a stone rolled off a cliff, it would climb once more to avoid the pine fields stretching from the steep edges of the valley walls to the meandering river coursing through the centre, its ever increasing contents surging between jagged rocks.

The small village lay asleep, the many windows barred against the wind, the fires burning within to stave off the cold. The doors bolted to deter the woodland creatures that sought refuge and food in this ungodly place.

The sky erupted once more, its devilish tongue striking out to hit the blip that passed below its nose. This time the lightning struck home, the sonic boom combined with the eruption of man-made fuels. The blip began to descend into chaos.

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Ray Calloway slumped against the grimy bar before him, one hand clutching a cheap bear, the other placed atop his longhaired head. For all intents and purposes he was dead, the only indication of life the rhythmic rise and fall of his back; this was a man who drank too much too fast too often.

The haggard looking bartender moved slowly along towards this heap of a man, serving the few others who had come out to the pub on this godforsaken night. Not that he particularly cared; they were paying customers, seeking shelter from the elements and wives.

"Want another one?" he asked the mass of hair and deerskin coat in front of him. Ray merely shook his half-full bottle above his head.

"You gonna' be alright to walk home?" Mike asked, leaning towards his most common customer. Finally Ray surfaced, taking a long swig from the brown glass, before placing it down upon the wood. Empty.

"I thought I was home," he said in a rough deep voice, holding out the empty bottle. His unshaven face could have been considered beautiful compared to the few other men in this village, if he made half an effort. But Ray didn't. He couldn't care about himself. Instead he worked at a lumberyard, felling trees all day, drinking for as long as he could at night until unconsciousness overtook him and he left the harsh reality of life. He used to have a wife, but now they simply shared a home and bank account. He slept on the sofa each night, TV dinners for supper.

"I'm gonna have to start limiting your intake," Mike joked back, an almost fatherly gaze on his face as he looked down.

"I pay my tab and don't cause trouble," Ray replied simply, looking out the window at the forest beyond where he spent each day.

"You know what I mean Ray."

"You know why I do this Mike."

"Go home buddy, sleep with Melissa. It must have been a long time since you felt a woman next to your skin. She misses you, every time I see her I can tell."

"I can't," Ray said, dropping his head into his outstretched hands.

"Life goes on," Mike said tenderly, patting Ray on the shoulder.

"What happened, it wasâ€œ terrible. But you have to go on."

"I can't," Ray whispered inconsolably, "You have no idea what it's like. I go home and I look in Melissa's eyes and all I see isâ€œ him. I can never go on, not without my boy."

Mike quietly set down Rays' next bear, before patting him on the shoulder once more and moving away to his next charge. Bringing the cold glass to his lips Ray slowly drank the numbing liquid within, his gaze focused outside the window, but his mind still as cold as ever.

In the distance a lone speck appeared against the backdrop of lightning, Ray's mind worked furiously to overcome the effects of the alcohol as he watched the small object plummet through the sky. Abruptly a fork of lightning clipped the object, the entire rear section erupting into a ball of flame. Ray's mind seemed to awaken from his stupor as he watched the craft dive into the forest, a ball of burning light.

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The wreckage was strewn throughout the northern territories of the forest. The small craft had plunged at such a steep angle that it had bounced three times before sliding across the rain-slicked ground. The young saplings had snapped from the force of the impact, setting off a chain reaction of falling wood. Ignited fuel ran atop the puddles of water, a steady patchwork of fire bringing the surrounding trees to a macabre light.

The powerful flashlights carried by the townsfolk cast circles of brilliant white light upon the debris littered ground. The dozen men moved quickly through the churning mud. A large section of a wing lay embedded in a thick tree trunk, sheared off during the crash. Everywhere scraps of debris lay haphazardly, some nothing more than a sheet of matte grey metal, others emblazoned with text and emblems.

"Hey Gaz, this one here says UNSC!" one man shouted to the leader of the group, waving a piece of the craft above his head, his light splashing across it at an obtuse angle, illuminating the four letters.

"Dam fleet," a couple of the men murmured at this enlightenment. These men were not radical resistance freedom fighters, they were however glad to be away from the main colonies of human population. There was no military presence on this planet, there was barely even a police force and half of that was out here tonight; three men.

"Keep looking," the leader shouted back from the front of the pack. His torch beam swung side to side, scanning for anything and everything. Passing the largest plume of smoke, which rose high into the sky, he found what he was looking for.

The UNSC Longsword is a very advanced machine, however it follows some very old, yet reliable design principles. Mainly the fact that the centre body is designed to stay intact and cushion whatever is inside it while the outside has many 'crumple zones' designed to take the force of a collision. It was a testament to the engineers' skills

that while the wings and practically everything else had broken loose, the main cockpit and crew sections remained structurally sound, if not for a few unfastened items scattered about.

The rear hatch fell away at the pull of an emergency lever. Inside the craft was dark, weapons and ammunition lay piled towards the right hand side as the ship was resting at a peculiar angle. Moving forwards, shotgun resting upon torch, Garry Newell peered into the cockpit and lay back against the bulkhead.

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Greenwich is only a small village, twenty homes, church, school for the children, a pub for the adults and then an assortment of small businesses. The closest hospital is three days drive away in the biggest city on the planet, which only has a population of thirty thousand people. As such the local villagers depend upon the small surgery nestled away in their midst. Doctor Kate Alexandria is the only truly medically qualified person there, but her two assistants had spent numerous hours practising under her guidance. It was one of these, Martin Koori who examined the teenage pilot in the cockpit of the ship.

The boy couldn't of been more than fourteen looking at the tell tale signs of aging and puberty, and yet he could have been an eighteen year old Olympic athlete with the toned physique on display. The muscled arms and chest were covered in minor lacerations and bruises, but otherwise the sole pilot was in peek physical condition. Moving down though Koori saw the boys' legs and winced. His right shin was badly damaged from a fallen control panel. Apparently the engineers had underestimated the amount of energy released when a metal object fell to the ground at super sonic velocities. Blood flowed slowly from the wound and the white of a bone could be seen below. Moving closer, Koori placed his fingertips against the child's neck and felt a strong pulse despite what he had been through.

Moving back, Martin talked quickly with Garry, updating him on the survivors' condition and how they would have to move him. Happy with the preparations the leader was making Koori leaned back into the cockpit. And felt cold steel press against his neck. The boy was awake and fully conscious; how! Martin's mind worked furiously trying to comprehend what he was feeling more than seeing. He spluttered trying to speak out, but the weapon was pressed harder against his sweating skin.

"Don't shout and I won't harm you," the boy said coldly without emotion, before removing the weapon from the doctors' neck and placing it on his lap, still aimed squarely at Martin, who simply slumped backwards without so much as a murmur. Something in the child's voice and demeanour sent shivers up Martin's spine, it sounded colder than any winter he had lived through. He looked up at the boy.

"Good. Now, explain what's happening."

Koori gazed confounded by the child's apparent lack of pain and emotion. For a moment he just gawped stupidly like a baby until the boy hit his leg with the pistol. Yelping with pain Martin grabbed hold of his throbbing shin.

"Your name," the boy suggested.

"Koori. Martâ€| Martin Koori. Doctor Martin Koori," he managed to sputter out, correcting himself each time.

"Where are we?" the boy asked looking out through the cracked glass for a split second.

"The North Territories, 'bout three miles north of Greenwich."

"So I'm here," the boy said slowly, to himself.

"Whereâ€| Where are you from?" Martin asked, curiosity overcoming his sense of survival. One look from the boy told him he had made a mistake, instantly silencing any further questions he might have had.

"I'm looking for someone," the child said slowly, his gaze returning to Martins' once more. "Ray Calloway."

Koori let his mouth sag open in surprise that this child knew a member of the community, but sense came back to him in time to answer before another blow from the pistol.

"He lives here," Martin answered slowly, "But why would you want to find him?"

"That is not your concern," the child answered quickly, "Can you take me to him?"

"Well yeah, but your in no condition to move, we've got to get a splint on that leg, then stretcher you back. It's about a mile to the road, then two miles of bumpy track. It's gonna be a while."

Finishing this the boy smiled towards Martin, before pulling his damaged leg out from under the console, followed by his second. If he felt any pain he didn't show it, not even a wince. Unlike Koori who, although he had seen and performed many operations, had never witnessed such brutal self-treatment. Reaching down the boy wrapped his hands around the damaged leg and felt it quickly, from top to bottom.

"The bone doesn't feel broken, possibly a hairline fracture though. Superficial flesh wound. You got any antiseptics and bandages?" he asked looking up at Koori who instantly sprang to his medical kit.

Passing the small vile of liquid and a thick roll of bandages he watched in morbid fascination as the child poured the vile into the wound, not cringing at all from the stinging pain, before wrapping his leg in the white roll.

Then, before Koori's very eyes, the boy stood up and walked out of the cockpit without so much as a limp. Following quickly Martin stood beside the boy in the pouring rain outside the Pelican. A few of the search party members walked towards them quickly, curiosity, shock and amazement etched over their faces in equal amounts.

"I thought you said he needed a god-dam stretcher," Garry shouted

out, rushing forwards, pushing past the other men.

"He justâ€!" Martin stammered, looking at the child next to him that stood an even six feet.

"What! Got up and walked out," Garry laughed sarcastically, followed by his compatriots.

"Yes."

The entire group fell silent at this revelation. The whole time the boy had remained soundless, constantly looking around, almost sizing up each man before him.

"He wants to see Calloway," Martin continued, stepping towards Garry.

"He asked for him by name?" the leader inquired quietly, so that the child couldn't overhear him in the rain.

"Yes."

"What for?"

"No Idea."

"Is he dangerous?" Garry asked almost silently. Looking back over his shoulder, Martin watched the child stand perfectly erect. The rain was quickly soaking into the military jumpsuit he wore; yet he made no motion of becoming cold or uncomfortable.

"He pulled a gun on meâ€!"

"What!" Garry almost screeched into Martin's ear.

"Will you listen," Koori said, returning to face his leader, "He pulled a gun on me, but put it away almost as quickly. It was like he was making sure I wasn't an enemy or something."

"What kind of new recruit gets a weapon and hijacks a ship?" Garry asked incredulously.

"If I know the current UNSC regs, you have to be eighteen to get in. Gaz, this kid here is twelve, at the most."

Stepping back, Garry stared disbelievingly at the military youngling before him.

"This just got a whole lot weirder," he said slowly.

"Also, he's been in this for a while. The scars on his body, at least the ones I saw, they're not recent and I know kids play rough, but thisâ€!" Martin let the silence fall between them, the only sound the continuous fall of rain and crackle of dying fire. Motioning towards one of the other law enforcement officers, Garry spoke in a hushed whisper.

"I want him detained, be careful, we don't know what he wants or what he's done."

The man nodded, proceeding towards the child who had not moved a muscle the whole time.

"What are you going to do with him then Gaz?" Koori questioned rhetorically.

"I have no idea," he replied honestly, "Probably send a message to UNSC command, get him moved out as quickly as possible."

Behind them a sudden splash penetrated the rains gushing sounds. Spinning around Koori watched a sodden officer pull himself up from the ground. Above him the kid stood stock still, watching the officer and every other man with a furious gaze.

"What the hell do you think you're doing!" Garry shouted out, moving towards the sole figure. Not speaking, the boy brought his hands forwards and showed the handcuffs hanging from one wrist.

"Maybe he didn't make it clear. You. Are. Under. Arrest," Garry shouted once over the rain.

Turning to look at Koori the boy smiled, before stepping backwards into the shadows created by the Longsword. Instantly the men brought their torches to bear, training them on the opening. Nothing.

The sides of the ship were in darkness, the fires were dying down. The only sources of light were the few torch beams. They had lost him. Spreading out, the search party hunted furiously for their prey. Watching the retreating backs, Koori sat under the shelter of the Pelican. Looking down at his clasped hands he let out a slow sigh.

Something wasn't right. The ship, the kid, his age, and now him asking to see Ray. Martin quietly mopped his wet hair out of his eyes and started back for town.

The morning sky brought with it light, the most useful ally for a hunter. The search party still moved through the woods, yet the boy had not even been glimpsed since his disappearing act.

Returning to town, Garry Newell knew he had a serious problem. A renegade child, dressed like a military soldier was running loose in the forests, looking for a well know family that had been through hardships only eight years ago.

Pulling to a stop outside Ray Calloway's house, Newell was sure he would still be at home. For one it was a Sunday. And number two; Ray was at the pub every night. Knocking furiously on the wooden door, Garry waited impatiently for the occupants within to rise. The sun was only just coming over the horizon, the dark clouds still omnipresent.

Knocking again, he heard movement within. Soon the door clicked open and Melissa Calloway stood before him, dressed in a silk nightgown. No one in this town used safety chains on doors; it was a small village, no viscous axe murderers here. Newell hoped that was still true.

"Garry!" Melissa half mumbled, wiping the sleep from the corner of her eyes.

"I'm sorry to wake you so early Mel, but I am Ray home. I need to speak to him urgently."

"Sure, sure," she said, stepping back to allow Garry into the house. Walking in, he found himself in the usual type of house for this village. Simple living room, kitchen, bathroom, two bedrooms upstairs. With a sense of regret he realised one of them would be empty. Lying on the cosy sofa, Ray slept peacefully, or as peacefully as a man with his past could.

Moving towards him Melissa roughly shook him from his slumber, before asking Garry if he would like coffee. Accepting the offer she walked off towards the kitchen. Newell sat down on an armchair adjacent to the sofa, glancing around the room again. The fireplace was lined with pictures of a once happy family, three members, now two separate parents. Ray rolled off the sofa and cursed softly as he sat back up. His gaze slowly focused on Garry and he cursed again.

"I didn't do it," he said in the usual groggy morning type of voice, extenuated by the alcohol still in his blood stream.

"Guilty conscience?" Garry joked back.

"Mel," Ray called out loudly, "You offer our guest some coffee?"

"Already on its way," she said, poking her head into the room.

"Ehh," Ray muttered in defeat, leaning back on the sofa.

"Want me to start?" Garry asked, moving forwards.

Ray merely nodded, before taking two aspirins from a bottle next to the sofa and swallowing them dry.

"I'm guessing you saw the ship crash last night?"

"So that's what it was."

"Yep. Anyway, we found one person on board, he was alive and not badly hurt."

"Good, good," Ray simply responded.

"He asked to see you Ray. He asked for you by name."

"What the hell," Ray whispered slowly, "where is he now. I want to see him."

Garry almost recoiled at the sudden action before accepting the steaming mug from Mel who had returned to join them. "We lost him, he got away from us. Don't worry though we're searching for him."

"Why? Why would anyone come looking for me?" Ray questioned, to no one and everyone at once.

"I don't know at this moment. But don't worry Ray. I'm going to have your house guarded 24/7. No one will be able to get to you."

"Can the guard move to the pub? If I'm going to be staying in one place, then I'd be happiest there."

Garry smiled at how Ray could have such a humorous outlook even under the prospect of a mad axe wielding madman running around the forests looking for him.

"Sorry Ray, you're staying home and sober until we catch this bastard."

"He hurt one of yours?" Ray questioned.

"Nothing major, more hurt pride than bones."

"You catch him, you let me know immediately."

"Will do," Garry said, standing up, sipping his warm coffee, "Sorry I can't finish this Mel, but I gotta' run."

"No problem," she said sweetly before taking the cup from his hands.

"Matt will be on first guard duty. I'm going to send him here when I get back to the station."

"Sure," Ray said simply, looking up from the sofa, "Tell him to bring a six pack."

Smiling, Garry walked out the front door, Mel shutting it behind him. The shadows around his eyes were nothing compared to the shadow approaching the rear of the house.

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The day wore on slowly. The grey sky turned deep crimson, then deeper black. The previous nights rain returned in heavier and heavier waves. Soon the already waterlogged ground squelched under foot, instantly churning paths to rivers of mud.

Matt Locke stayed his eight hour shift before been relieved by another officer, glad to be out of the rain he ran home as quickly as he could. Within the wooden walls Ray Calloway passed the time by watching re-runs of terrible drama programs on the small television in the living room. Melanie went about her usual business before leaving to go to a 'girls night' she had been invited to. Leaving a TV dinner in the microwave she waved goodbye to her once husband before shutting the front door and leaving Ray alone.

By eight o'clock boredom had set in fully and Ray was prepared to rip out his eyes just to have something to do. He had never realised how bad TV or the dinners that accompanied it were.

Pushing the plastic plate off his lap he leant forwards to grab the remote, when he moved back though he was not alone. The stranger stood in the doorway to the kitchen, silhouetted by the lighting outside. He hadn't made a sound, not even stepping on one of the creaky floorboards littered throughout the house.

"So you're the one they're after," Ray said, using the remote to turn the TV off.

The shadow stood motionless, the light reflecting off the smooth metal barrel of the pistol that was currently aimed at the floor. With an almost mechanical motion the body slid forwards, the wash from the small lamps in the room bringing the torso and lower body into clear view.

"What's your name?" Ray asked, amused by the stone-faced silence.

"Sam 51," the darkness said back to him.

"What the hell kind of name is that?" Ray exclaimed, setting the small remote control back down on the table before him.

"An ID, my name before that was Samuel Becker."

"Ok," Calloway said slowly, confused by this curious behaviour.

"You had a son," the darkness said slowly, at this Ray stood up sharply to better face this demon.

"How do you know about me and my family?" he asked roughly, his hands balling into fists. But the shadow only stood firm, not a single muscle twitched.

"He was taken from you six years ago."

"Bull shit!" Ray exclaimed at this, his whole body trembling with rage from suppressed memories, "My son died and you have no right to come into my house and say these things."

The shadow's head moved slowly to look at the gun held in the illuminated hand.

"Your son died from an unknown cause," the shadow whispered, the words lined with a sense of truth and power now. Ray felt his rage melt into fear, how could this person possibly know this.

"He would of taken about six months to die. His mind went first, by the end he didn't recognise you, then he couldn't walk or talk. After a while his body just gave up, no medical reason."

"Iâ€œ Iâ€œ" Ray stammered uncontrollably, "How could youâ€œ"

The darkness fell away as the boy stepped forwards once more, his scarred face seemed to hold no emotion, yet his grey eyes almost begged for trust.

"Mr Calloway, your son did not die, he was kidnapped, taken away to be put through horrible things. I met Jamie, because the same thing happened to me."

The old man fell back into the armchair to his side, his hands working their way up to his face. Soft sobs echoed out beneath the worn skin.

"Mr Calloway, Jamie wanted me to tell you everything. He wanted me to tell you why he could never come home and what happened to him. But only if you wanted to listen."

The hands fell away as Ray regained his composure. He had to know the truth. If only to bring a finality to his mind's agony.

"Tell me Sam, tell me what became of my son."

2. II

Ok, this could be the marmite section now, you'll either love it or hate it. There are some omissions and factual errors, but it shouldn't detract too much from the main story. Also a big thank you to PunKRockeR-FEREVA, my first reviewer. So, without further ado, this is the story of Jamie's incarceration.

Harsh Grip

Location: Reach

Timeframe: 1 month previously

"Jamie?"

The voice was cold, like the walls. Everything here was cold. Sterile. Not like home.

"Jamie, you in here? Mendez'll do his nut if you don't show up."

Home. Comfort was there, a family. A life other than this.

"Come on man, I'm not taking the rap for you again."

What gave them the right; to take everything he held dear, to torture his waking moments and torment his restless nights.

"Boy, if you're in there you had better get your ugly behind out asap or I'll make ya run round this god-dam planet three times let alone the track!"

The threats. Never a compliment, never a praise. Not like home.

"Move back cadet."

They were getting restless. Now they knew his torment as well. Let them suffer as he had sinceâ€¦ The time eluded Jamie, how long had he been alone, separated from his parents. Life hurt now, no mother to coddle him, no father to play with.

Hurried feet, sudden hammerings, man on wood, they were coming; the cowards who took children from the cradle. The door was splintering, fractures running along the grain; not long now.

"Trainee, this is your last chance. Come out. Or I'm gonna huff, and I'm gonna puff and I will blow your ass into orbit."

Humour. Refuse of the weak in times of desperation. Why did they bother, better they come and get him.

"Sir, please, maybe I can talk him out."

A friends wish, protect that which he holds dear. Or needs, to stay strong, to stay sane.

"You had your chance Riley."

Coldness again, the voice and the walls, one grows with impatience, the other shrinks with each passing moment. And now something else. The cold steel, smooth shaft, delicate weight. This is hope, in every one of the twelve rounds. The safety is flicked off; the hammering on the door subsides. The revelation is heard by all present; death is waiting in the hand of the executioner and victim.

"Son, listen to me,"

And so the pleading begins, the begging; if only to save their own worthless hides. Man, in all his despicable glory, reduced to his knee's for one's own salvation.

"Please, just come out. We can talk about this. Don't do anything stupid."

Oh no, Jamie wouldn't want to appear foolish, make sure a round is chambered, safety off, wouldn't want to make a mistake. Not this late in the game. The door to the supply room is silent, its pain evident from the beatings. No doubt the fate Jamie would endure should he subside.

Home. A lone tear snakes down Jamie's cheek, its path long and arduous to the tiny droplet. The pistol glints in the light cast from the solitary bulb. The beatings, they start again, but the door holds, a metal rack bracing it against the rallies of a furious man, one who calls himself a teacher, a father. The cold concrete walls press in on Jamie, the room littered with equipment, tools. But no hope. Only the gun and its twelve shining bullets can offer that. The door splits, light begins to slip through, but the barricade holds.

"Pass it here," the false father orders outside, but it is not Jamie he is talking to. He alone understands the mindset of a child resigned to death. Fumbling outside, resistance, then the sharp snap of a pin removed from its hole. Jamie stands, the gun clasped in his steady hand by his side. A foot, a blur of motion, the door groans under the force, wood splinters, then shatters inwards. Jamie slowly raises his weapon, arms never faulting, gaze fixed upon the puncture in the wood. Another blast of motion, an object hurled into Jamie's confined world, and then the realisation slips in, too quickly for a reaction, not enough time to put the gun against his skull let alone pull the trigger.

The small canister, rolled, knocked against the opposite wall and came to a rest. Its contents rushed out, filling the room with a suffocating fog in seconds. Jamie felt his eyes roll, the weapon fall from his loose grip. Falling to his knees he hated every one of them, the god-dam cradle robbers. Theâ€!

Darkness came. But Jamie's father was not there to protect him from the monsters under the bed. He was still at home.

Home.

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"Hit him."

Pain. Bastards. Home.

"Again!"

Jamie let his head roll from the impact against his jaw. His mind felt like it was running full pelt through treacle. Thoughts flickered through his mind, images timed between the poundings of the men around him. His eyes hurt, his nose felt off centre and blood flowed freely from his mouth. They had gone to work on him. And then some.

"Stop, let him breathe, let him savour every moment."

The voice, it wasn't Mendez, wasn't anyone Jamie recognised.

"Take him back, let him rot with the rats for a while."

Strong arms, unbelievable pain and Jamie was floating, his mind swimming in endorphins, barely conscious of the path his feet followed as he was dragged. It was cold, so very cold. But a new cold, the void left behind when something is ripped from its roots. A child from its home. A soul from its body. Scraping, metal on rough stone, then flesh on stone. Jamie rolled over as he was violently thrown into a cell. He didn't move, not for a long time, he just lay upon the cold ground and thought of blissful oblivion. And just how far away he was. Could he just will his body to die, here, right now in this dank room so far from home.

The light through the small window waned and died, the sounds of unaffected routine echoed through the concrete, yet Jamie still lay where he had been thrown. Voices, new sounds, from outside. Jamie's ears pricked at the slightest deviation, his eyes hurt to open, his left eye no more than a bruise. Rustling, a pant of exertion, then speech. A familiar voice in this claustrophobic prison.

"Jamie, wake up."

Sam, the voice of his friend, possibly only friend. Maybe not even a friend any more. Jamie lifted a single finger on his outstretched right arm, it was a tiny movement, but Sam saw it for what it was.

"What the hell happened man, Mendez was screwing at us earlier. Made us all swim the Big Horn, my arms are still aching."

Jamie grinned lightly, the false father was angry, lasing out at his children. Good, maybe he would learn the pain not of battle wounds, but emotional scarring.

"John had to stop Kelly earlier, said she wanted to 'tear your fucking heart out'".

Jamie laughed at his friend's humour, then felt the spears in his chest, the ribs broken out of place. His amusement turned into a grimace.

"What the hell did you do?" Sam asked again, his concern obvious. "Riley's holed up somewhere too, chief said he ain't been debriefed yet, but we all know that's bull. Mendez just don't want him talking."

The false father, locking the children in their bedrooms for playing too loud. Bastard.

Jamie picked himself up off the ground, his arms barely pained him, only his chest and head ached. Even now they throbbed dully. The world spun as he laid a hand upon the stone walls.

Outside Sam swore silently, "Patrols comin' Jim, I gotta go. I'll come back later."

"Sam."

The boy froze upon hearing his name and looked back inside.

"Don't come back."

Before he could reply Sam had dropped to the ground and dodged the wavering lights of the two guards.

Eventually Jamie felt the darkness sneak into his mind like a well trained infiltrator, but he had no energy left to fight it. This time sleep came peacefully, but upon a troubled mind.

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The blast made every nerve fire continuously, every aching muscle to spasm and the mind to confront the brutal reality. Jamie picked himself up of the floor, his clothes drenched in the ice water that had been hurled at him. A guard stood in the doorway, silhouetted by the dim lights of the corridor behind. He wore a sadistic grin to match the mp band on his arm.

"Time to rise and shine."

Jamie ran his tongue over bleeding gums, pooling the congealed blood in his mouth. Sucking back he spat over the guards shoes, ruining his immaculately polished finish.

"You littleâ€| oh you are gonna pay for that."

Stepping forwards he planted a solid boot in Jamie's chest, bruising still broken ribs. Rolling onto his other side, Jamie clutched at his abdomen and violently relieved his stomach of any contents it might have had. His throat burned terribly and he fell back against the rough floor coughing.

"Not so tough now are ya."

He grinned manically, as if conquering a crippled child was an accomplishment.

"The Commander wants to see you so get up before I make you."

"Do your worst."

The words hurt to speak, but they were the only act of defiance Jamie could muster without risking extra injuries.

"Stand. Now!"

Nothing. Jamie would not justify the order with a retort. Let the guard build up his anger, maybe he would do what was necessary. But no. Grabbing Jamie by the neck he dragged him bodily from the room, swinging him into the walls at each turn. But Jamie lay there, oblivious to his contorted journey, and this only increased the pace at which the guard moved.

All too soon the ride was at an end. The burly guard was panting lightly, his brow slick with sweat. Knocking on the door he waited for a response before proceeding with his charge. Hastily moving Jamie to a seat he saluted and left, closing the door behind him.

"Tell me boy, what makes you think you're any different to the other trainees here?"

Jamie let his head loll back on the chair, eyes closed in peace or pain the General couldn't tell. But he wasn't accustomed to being ignored, the slap he laid across the child's cheek evidence of his impatience.

"Well?"

"There's nothing you can say or do that will make me change my mind."

Jamie knew the reply was childish, almost clichÃ©, but he was enjoying this, the way a lunatic might look death in the face and laugh. Jamie began to grin, a manic sign of desperation and acceptance.

"Stop your grinning boy."

Another slap; bigger grin.

"What the hell are you trying to achieve? What the fuck are you grinning for!"

Now the General stood over him, his face twisted with rage and arrogance.

"Peace."

The word was whispered softly, ever so softly, as if the breath alone could blow it away like sand in the wind.

"There ain't no such thing 'round here. You're in the army in case Doctor Halsey and your trainers didn't make it clear. You are gonna train in this here army, you are gonna fight for this army and by God you will die in this army. By the enemy's hands or ours, it makes no

difference to me."

"I'll take whichever one comes first."

"There isn't any hope for you is there boy."

"You took that from me a long time ago."

"We took it because you were weak; you have to earn things like that. You're pathetic and only when you prove us wrong can you be afforded such privileges."

"Quit your whining."

The General stuttered, his face paling at such a blatant case of disobedience.

"Now you listen here boy."

"Your threats are empty. Do as you promised or let the enemy take me. Either way fucking kill me before I have to listen to you ramble on and on!"

Jamie felt his chest roar with his words, blood collecting at the back of his throat. Why couldn't they just kill him. Letting his head fall into his hands he felt his eyes well up. Not now, he couldn't appear weak. It was too far gone, no longer an option. He had to face death like his father would.

"Very well. Sergeant."

The soldier from before re-entered, sneering down at the child as he stood to attention.

"I want you to prep a pelican immediately and order the other trainees to assemble in the courtyard by 2100 hours."

"Sir. Yes Sir."

"Thank you Sergeant. That will be all."

"Sir."

Snapping off a final salute the soldier moved to the door in two quick strides and was gone.

"You're going to die trainee, I'll grant you that. But your death will at least serve a purpose."

The General sat back in his high chair to allow Jamie to contemplate his ambiguous remark.

"You will be dropped at a random location in the vicinity of this base. You will carry only what you wear now, nothing more."

The words hit Jamie like the bullets from the pistol he could of, should of, fired earlier.

"Your ex-teammates will be dropped nearby shortly thereafter. Their orders; search and destroy. I imagine you can guess their

target."

"And my target?"

Jamie felt a lump rise in his throat, why now, when death was assured, did he feel fear.

"Apart from survival? Well, lets see."

The General swung side to side in his chair, obviously pleased at Jamie showing traces of fear.

"I'll tell you what recruit, if you can get back to this office I will personally sign the release papers for you and order a ride back to your home world. How does that sound?"

"Home."

It wasn't a question, Jamie's mind raced to comprehend what success could mean. He had found hope outside of death. Home. Hope.

"And naturally to be certain you get your wish I'll triple all patrols and put the base on high alert. No reason everyone can't benefit from your death."

"Bullshit."

The General narrowed his eyes at the expletive, his patience waning.

"There's no way you'd release me, you couldn't."

"I assure you, I don't think you'll even make it to the drop zone, but if you do by some miracle find your way back here I will let you go. As long as once you're out you never mention your time here. If the UNSC ever hears a single rumour we will eliminate you and anyone you've ever talked to or even glanced at. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal."

"Now I said you couldn't take anything, but there's no fun in hunting limp prey. Report to the medical office before going to the pelican hangers. Can I trust you to do that?"

"As much as I can trust you."

"Very well then, you have until 2000 hours to prepare. Time is ticking young martyr, make your death useful."

-

Hope. How long had he been living without it. And now, when the figurative carrot was dangling in front of him, what did he have to do. Evade his enforced family, slip into a military base on high alert and then hope a man kept his word. Hope.

Jamie sat on a sterile bed within the medical bay of the base, his mind too occupied to really care what was happening around him. A guard stood beside the door, merely a precaution. Pointless at best.

He probably couldn't even raise his rifle in time should Jamie attack.

A medic worked quickly; there wasn't much he could do. Bruising to the face and chest, fractured ribs, possible concussion. Carefully wrapping field bandages around the boy's stomach he spoke to the soldier behind him.

"Please go to the supply room down the corridor and get me some more bandages private."

"Sir, I was ordered to not let the trainee out of my sight, the commander'll have my ass if I do."

"This boy has suffered major internal trauma, he will hardly be able to stand, let alone fight. Now, the bandages if you please."

With a last, begrudging look the soldier quick-marched out of the room, leaving Jamie alone with his doctor. He sat there, hands cuffed together while the medic moved to a cupboard.

"And why exactly did you send that soldier to get more bandages? I'm sure there are plenty left."

"Silence Dejâ;."

"Perhaps, Doctor, you wished to be alone with your charge."

"I said enough Dejâ;, you try my patience."

"And I should report you now."

"For what, trying to ensure we do not run out of necessary equipment."

"What is that Doctor."

Jamie watched the interplay between his healer and the base's AI. His suspicions were aroused, why had the doctor wanted to be alone with him.

"If you're doing what I think you're doing, then you will want to include a stimulant."

"AI's don't think Dejâ;, and I am not finished yet."

"Our friendly guard is making his return trip now Doctor, just thought you would like to know."

"How knowledgeable of you Dejâ;, could you possibly be so kind as to errâ€|"

"Delay him Doctor. Done. You have five minutes."

"Very good. Now then."

Jamie moved back on the cold metal table as the Doctor turned to face him, carrying an assortment of bottles and needles. He glanced quickly at his patient, then set to work. Within two minutes he had filled three of the injectors with a concoction of different liquids.

Quickly slipping caps over the end of the sharp needles he grabbed a thick piece of gauze and carefully wrapped it around the needles. Jamie just sat, wondering what the hell this man was doing.

"Time DejÃ¡?" he asked as he used medical tape to secure his little package.

"You still have over 2 minutes guaranteed Doctor."

"Ok then," he said at last, turning to face Jamie better, "arms up."

Moving forwards the old man lifted Jamie's left arm and slid the package between the bandages on his side, it only appeared as a small bump and would not be noticed by anyone, and even if they did it could be passed off as a piece of gauze to stanch a flow of blood.

"Listen to me son," he began very quietly, leaning forwards next to Jamie, "I have just given you three auto-injectors. Each contains a mixture of painkillers, stimulants and other assorted drugs. Place it next to the skin on your forearm and click the end, the needle will do the rest. They will give you a boost and should stave off exhaustion."

"Whyâ€| why are you" Jamie began, but the Doctor cut him off.

"No time for explanations. The effects take less than five minutes to take hold, but do not use them within a space of thirty minutes or you'll overdose. This is my security pass, it can get you into every room in this base save a few. I'm not going to use mine tonight so don't worry about double-entry problems."

The Doctor slipped the plastic card into the bandages next to the needles. He stood up straight, looked over to the cupboards he had raided before and seemed to come to a decision. Quickly moving towards them he turned his back to Jamie. Within sixty seconds he returned and carried a rack of small vials in his hands. Reaching for a strip of bandage, he began to secure each vial to it using tape, similar to a bandolier. Finally he secured it around Jamie's stomach. He still looked like he had doubts in his mind about doing this.

"Each of those vials contains enough tranquillisers to knock out a grown man before he has time to even shout. I thought it would be better if I was treating sleeping men than dead men."

"You think I'll actually make it?" Jamie asked, bewildered at this man's faith in him.

"I will not give you false hope child. I've spent over twenty years in the army and I've seen too many brave men die because of it. No, I'm just giving you a better shot."

"Doctor," DejÃ¡'s voice piped in, "time's nearly up."

"Thank you, DejÃ¡."

"Thank you Doctor," Jamie said as he felt along the bandages around his body.

"No need son, just remember, never give up."

"I won't."

As the doors to the infirmary slid open Jamie hopped down off the bed and walked towards the approaching soldier.

"You're supplies Sir," he stated, trying to keep the frustration out of his voice.

"Oh yes, just put them on the bed Private, I can sort them out in a minute."

"Sir," the guard replied, relieving himself of the weight, then escorting Jamie out of the room.

Turning to face the empty walls of the bay the Doctor let out a slow sigh, ashamed at what his fellow men could do to such young children.

3. III

Well this chapter will be the main body of Jamie's story, only one more to go after this. Enjoy ;-).**

>

**Harsh Grip

>

The pelican rode in the dwindling daylight, flirting the tops of the tall tress below. Jamie lay back against the bulkhead, trying to catch the last possible vestiges of sleep for a long time. His fresh fatigues provided warmth, but the rear compartment was still icily cold from the rushing wind outside. Around him six armed marines sat glaring in his direction; for all the training ops they had been humiliated in they would like nothing more than to pitch the boy out the back right here, right now. Jamie gently ran his hands over the bandages beneath his uniform, feeling the reassuring bumps of his little aids. Though his body rested his mind was fully conscious, formulating plans, running over possible scenarios and watching the sky and trees behind the pelican, trying to calculate its final position in relation to the base.

The small craft bucked in a sudden updraft and Jamie shifted his weight, the two men beside him raising their rifles threateningly.

"One minute to drop," the pilot called from the cockpit.

The men around Jamie stood up, each holding his rifle at the ready should the child try anything funny. The pelican slowly began to descend into the middle of a flat field, at least half a mile from the nearest cover. They were really going to make this difficult he thought. As soon as the bottom of the pelican came within two metres of the ground Jamie was mercilessly pushed out, rolling onto the damp grass to try and absorb some of the impact. The pelican's engines roared and quickly gained altitude again, disappearing into the night sky.

Immediately standing Jamie began a quick jog towards the south, away from the base. The patrols would almost certainly concentrate in three main positions; the space between his drop point and the base, the flanks of the main patrol and around the immediate perimeter of the base. If Jamie could get around both of the first patrols he would only have to deal with the base guard. Food and water wasn't an issue, he didn't expect to be on the planet come daybreak, he would reach the heavens under his own steam or on a ship, either way was fine.

But there was hope. And hope was all that mattered, for where there was a will there was always a way.

-

The field seemed to stretch for miles yet Jamie knew it to be only a half mile at most. Beyond that was a solid band of untamed forest, thicker and wilder than anything he had trained in; perfect cover.

Reaching a small rivulet before the tree line Jamie dropped to his knees to catch his breath, ashamed at how quickly his ribs had begun to ache. Far off in the distance he could hear the roar of multiple pelicans, all closing in on his drop position. He had to move quickly and silently now if he was to survive, this would be the most dangerous portion of his evasion, when the pursuers were at their most ferocious and alert.

Moving to the trees he slipped in between swiftly, careful to not disturb any foliage lest it give away his position. Brambles and low bushed hindered his progress but soon Jamie reached a small service road, most probably used for testing light ground vehicles. Sticking to the sides he began running west, intending to completely circle the base.

Suddenly from overhead a pelican roared past, its twin engines kicking up a furious wind of dirt and plant material. Jamie dove into the bushes, ignoring the stings from the thorny plants. The mechanical beast passed by, oblivious to the boy below. Slowly Jamie picked himself out of the bushes and looked along the dirt road. The sky overhead had deepened to a crimson red, barely a cloud in the sky. Cold night for sure.

Jamie stayed on the road for only a short while, it would be too risky to follow it all the way. Branching off into the forest he headed north-westerly, the sounds of the woods changing as the sun dipped below the horizon and the darker creatures came out to hunt.

-

The soft earth felt good underneath Jamie's boots, he kept a steady pace, easily reaching a six minute mile. By his estimates the base would be to his east by now, the patrols far back to the south. He didn't doubt they would pick up his trail but even the best trackers had to slow down to find their prey's marks, and Jamie would just keep on running. He could feel the hope in his chest begin to swell, but he pushed it down, now was not the time to get ahead of himself. He had to make it to the base first.

The moon was reaching its apex ahead, its glow bringing a pale illumination to the surrounding foliage. In the distance the moon glinted towards Jamie, like the reflections off of a glass window on a sunny day, or from a sniper's scope training in upon its target. Jamie dove to the deck just as the muzzle of the far off rifle flashed, the sound trailing behind. The bullet thudded into the tree behind, almost penetrating straight through its core. They were definitely using live ammunition.

Jamie stayed low, crawling on all fours, trying to outflank the sniper. Thoughts began erupting in his mind, why would this sniper be so far removed from the search forces, would he call in back-up, did he already have back-up. But Jamie couldn't think about that, he had to move, and quickly.

Years of training had taught him that.

And made him good at it.

He hated himself for it.

And yet now it would save him.

In the distance Jamie could almost hear the sniper searching for his target, sweeping the thick foliage for any sign of motion or disturbance. Most snipers would wait in a secure position with a wide, clear view but Jamie knew who this was. He knew she would not wait for others to take her prize. He knew she meant to kill him.

-

Linda held the rifle perfectly steady in her hands, she could see the grass moving slightly ahead, swaying in the opposite direction to that of the wind. She had him, all she had to do was wait for her target to poke his head up. She snuggled the rifle in closer to her chest.

The motion stopped, he was barely fifty metres from her now, the low lying bushes thick, obscuring visual contact.

Linda pulled back the bolt on her rifle, the next round gently sliding into position. Bringing the scope up to her eye she looked out on where her target lay, the night vision amplifying what little light was available. He was waiting her out, trying to make her move first, but she wouldn't fall for his trap, she could crouch here for days if necessary.

The grass shook; Linda drew in a breath.

Breathe half out.

Steady the sight.

Check wind.

Ready.

The grass moved again and Linda placed her finger against the

trigger.

Goodbye Jamie.

-

Jamie lay flat on his stomach, she was watching, he could feel her, as if the scope on her rifle was focusing her gaze upon a tiny point that burned with the concentration.

He hated what he must do.

He doubted if she would. Snipers were trained not to associate with their target. Linda was the best sniper out of all of them.

Jamie moved again, he could see Linda stiffen at the motion in the grass and grinned despite himself. Tunnel vision. She wouldn't see him coming.

Throwing a final rock, Jamie swung down from the tree, his legs wrapped tightly around the thick branch. He grabbed Linda by the hair and threw her head forwards, into the butt of her rifle. Before she could retaliate Jamie forced one of the small vials of tranquiliser into her mouth and cracked it. She dropped to the ground within seconds, looking totally at peace.

Jamie released his grasp on the overhanging tree and checked for anyone else. Feeling safe for the moment he carefully lay Linda against a tree, relieving her of her rifle, equipment and radio. Her face looked deathly pale in the dim moonlight, her right eye darkening as he knelt beside her.

And then he went back to running.

This felt so natural that Jamie wondered what it would be like when he got home, when he didn't have to run operations and people wouldn't be giving him orders or trying to shoot him. He would get used to it, just like he had gotten used to this.

But first, he had to make it home.

-

The night air had grown cold and Jamie shivered despite his constant exertion. Stopping he slumped against a large oak tree, chest heaving trying to get air into his lungs. Pulling one of the booster-shots he had gotten from the Doctor, Jamie twirled it between his fingers, wondering whether to use it or not.

'Alpha Three, report. Over'

The small radio crackled from within Jamie's belt, most likely from the distance. Good, that meant they weren't closing in on him. Jamie recognised the voice, John. Their self-appointed leader, ready to charge into any situation given the order. He was a mindless fool.

'Say again, Alpha Three what is your situation. Over'

Jamie pulled the small device from his belt, realising that Linda was

most probably alpha three. Damn it. He had hoped he had more time.

'God-damn-it three, respond.'

Jamie clicked the mic twice; confirmation signal. If all went to plan John would think that Linda was ok, she just couldn't talk at that time, not surprising for a sniper.

The radio clicked twice in response. Fool.

The moon now hung in the twilight sky, its gibbous face obscured by heavy clouds. It would rain before the night was out. Jamie silently un-slung the rifle from his back and ejected the magazine. Removing the tranq vials from his chest wrap he began swapping out the bullets in the cartridges for the glass vials. He had created a long-range tranquilliser rifle. A shot to the head or upper torso might still be lethal, but he had enough skill to avoid causing a mortal wound.

Setting down the heavy weapon Jamie pulled out the booster-shot once again, twirled it once, then pressed it against his arm. It hissed silently, pricking against his skin. Digging carefully he buried it beneath a scrub of bush to ensure it would never be found. The Doctor would keep his anonymity. Jamie owed him that much.

It was time to start moving, he had to make it to the base before daybreak. Hefting the rifle over his shoulders, Jamie looked at the stars to judge his direction before setting off towards the base.

-

'Situation report son'

'Sir, target has so far avoided contact with any patrols.'

'When I gave you this task you said you would have containment within two hours. It's been three now Spartan and I have yet to hear a single good word.'

'With all due respect Sir, we have the advantage here. We will find the target, we will neutralise the target and we will succeed.'

'I like your optimism son, but you had better learn not to disappoint me. You have until 0700 to get this little turd or you will be taking his place.'

'Sir we will not fail'

'I know you won't. Over and out'

John placed the radio back on his belt and looked at his assembled troops, each razor sharp, buzzing for some action. They would not fail, that little runt would not, could not, beat them.

"We're gonna pull back, concentrate on the base perimeter. Check all incoming vehicles and patrol the fence."

There were mixed groans at this, many had hoped to chase Jamie

through the bushes, hunting him down like an animal. John unclipped his radio and put it to his lips.

'Alpha Three, report. Over'

Linda wasn't responding, she had already failed to check in at the predetermined time. She could be like that though, peering down her scope to the exclusion of everything else.

"Dammit." He exclaimed to himself.

'Say again, Alpha Three what is your situation. Over'

Two clicks, faint with the distance, but she had responded. John quickly clicked in response and then turned back to his teammates.

"Let's move."

-

The world was shattering, the pieces falling apart. Jamie could feel the cold now, chilling his very core. Thunderous booms echoed far off in the distance as the first drops of icy rain began to fall. The soft ground had turned to slushy mud, coating Jamie's lower legs. But still he ran, through heaven and hell he would charge to see his parents again.

Ahead he could see the artificial lights of the base; they drew him like a moth to its doom. Jamie fell against a thick tree, his chest heaving, blood pooling in his mouth, whatever had begun healing, he had just set it back a month. Pulling the equipment pack he had relieved Linda of, Jamie went through it, trying to lighten his load before his break-in. The first thing he saw was a poncho, quickly donning it and cursing himself for not having checked earlier. After that came an assortment of rations, torch, signal flares, rope and a small back-up pistol Linda had obviously felt would be unnecessary. Touching the cold metal of the weapon Jamie thought back to just a day before, pressing the barrel to his skull, the desperation, finality. No more; he had hope. Checking a round was chambered he stuck the weapon in his belt, feeling like he was prepping for war. Standing up he put the rifle and rope across his back and then put the torch and flares in his pockets. He wouldn't need the rations; he would be leaving this place tonight, one way or another.

The fence that ran the perimeter of the base was over ten feet tall, topped with barbed wire and cleared of trees for twenty feet in each direction. It would be suicide to try and cross it. Sneaking along the tree line Jamie eventually reached a main access road, flanked by two large guard bunkers. Within multiple guards relaxed back, talking, laughing or sleeping. Content in the belief that the rogue trainee would be killed before he made it within a mile of the base.

Jamie backtracked up the road from the gatehouse, searching for any viable way of penetrating the defences. He searched in vain for almost a quarter of an hour, the rain getting more and more ferocious, the thunder clouds now reaching overhead. Eventually he reached a small shack, constructed from wood it looked battered and beaten, as if it had been placed on the land and forgotten. Within

hushed voices could be heard, three soldiers at most Jamie thought as he listened. They were taking shelter from the rain, not needed at the base for another few hours. Outside their single vehicle sat in a growing puddle, the small four-wheel drive jeep looking dejected. The rear compartment had been hastily covered with tarpaulin, peeking inside Jamie found it littered with crates of munitions and assorted heavy weapons. Grinning from ear to ear he opened the drivers door, releasing the handbrake. Quickly getting behind the vehicle, Jamie anchored himself in the mud. Straining for all he was worth he slowly pushed the vehicle forwards, helped by the lack of traction the wheels had. Once he had some momentum it became a great deal easier to guide the large vehicle down the road.

When he had put a good distance between himself and the wooden shack Jamie slowed the car to a stop, guiding it into the undergrowth before raiding the back. Removing an M19 rocket launcher, Jamie stocked up on ammunition before going to work properly. He strapped several rockets together, using strips of the tarpaulin to secure them. Carefully removing the remote detonator coil from a lotus anti-tank mine, Jamie placed the mine within the rocket bundle and armed it. Picking up the improvised explosive he placed it carefully within the back of the truck and then ran around to the front. Starting the engine he drove the vehicle until it was within sight of the gate to the base and then climbed out. Engaging the handbrake, Jamie propped a large stick between the drivers' seat and the accelerator. The engine strained against the handbrake, roaring to be set loose. Reaching over, Jamie yanked back the handbrake and the jeep shot forward, accelerating faster and faster towards the guard bunkers. It was at least a mile away when Jamie shot the signal flare into the air, alerting the men within. They looked up from their relaxed positions, took in the situation and ran.

As the jeep reached the gate Jamie depressed the trigger on the mine's remote detonator.

The vehicle smashed into the left hand bunker, briefly lifting off its back wheels.

Light poured from the rear, momentarily freezing the scene in a ghostly flash.

The tarpaulin skin of the jeep burnt away as the heat engulfed everything around it.

The ground shook as the rockets ignited, a ferocious blast hotter than the sun ripping through the steel-reinforced concrete of the bunker as if it were tissue paper.

The rain evaporated in the air, windows shattered in the immediate buildings from the concussion wave.

Bodies were thrown forty feet away, limbs flailing. And Jamie strode through the carnage, rocket launcher perched on his shoulder, pistol gripped loosely in the other hand.

It was his leaving party and he'd give them something to remember him by.

Alpha team was still four miles away when they saw the flash of light, followed by the man-made thunder. It seemed world war four was starting, and they hadn't been invited. Picking up the pace, John and his team sprinted towards the action.

-

All hell had broken loose, medics rushed to the wounded; water arcs crashed on the ruins of what had once been an impenetrable structure. And in all the confusion Jamie had slipped through, darkness his friend, stealth his best chance of achieving his objective.

He could see the Generals' room from his perch, the large window dark situated on the top floor of the command building, the commander elsewhere. But he must be patient; there are things to do before he can confront the monster. Jamie lay back on the flat roof, his thoughts drifting, his body aching from the abuse. They would be coming now, his old teammates, they wouldn't rest until he was dead.

Taking another booster injection from his pockets, Jamie felt the exhaustion more than ever. His whole body felt like it was reaching breaking point, yet his mind kept screaming at him 'just a bit further'. Putting the injection against his flesh Jamie wondered just how much further he could go.

-

'Tell me Spartan, are you intentionally sabotaging this mission?'

'No Sir.'

'Then why have you shown nothing but gross incompetence tonight? A simple search & elimination operation and you manage to balls it up.'

'Sir, with all due respect, we are hunting one of our own. He knows all of our patterns, methods and tricks.'

'Then you know all of his patterns! Use that against him, trap him, flush him out, do whatever you must to destroy him. Do I make myself clear?'

'Sir, yes Sir.'

John felt his anger rising, he didn't like being on the losing side, but so far that's all his team had done. Fail. Around him his brothers and sisters scouted the wreckage of the bunker for any signs of Jamie, but so far they had come up empty handed. He was mocking them, walking right up to their faces and laughing.

"Sir, what do we do now?"

John looked to see Fred, kicking at a piece of burnt metal, the UNSC logo scorched on its surface; he looked thoroughly demoralised.

"We spread out. Fred, you and Kelly take positions in the main command building, guard the commander. Grace and Vinh, I want you on the top of the main radar tower, keep your eyes peeled and radio any

sightings. The rest of you, split up into pairs and patrol the base, each take a sector and everyone is to check in every five minutes. Understood?"

A chorus of 'yes sirs' and 'affirmatives' followed as the team split up to take their positions. John was left with Will, both looking disgruntled at being shown up so badly.

"Sir, when we find the little bastard, do we have to bring him back alive?"

"Negative, dead will suffice."

Will grinned wildly as the duo set off.

-

Jamie had fallen into a slumber, his mind desperately deprived of beautiful sleep. The radio at his side brought him back to the awful reality of his situation. They were here, his old teammates, Jamie listened as the various units checked in, each sounding both tired yet desperate. The moon had past its highest point, it must have been the small hours. It sure as hell felt like it Jamie bitterly thought.

In the far distance he could still hear the faint crackle of the fire. It must of ignited something within, no amount of water could put it out and the soldiers had long ago decided to simply let it burn itself out. Most of the base staff had been evacuated. Lying on the cold roof of the building Jamie remained hidden by his poncho, the raised edging preventing anyone from seeing him from the ground.

The sniper rifle and rocket launcher lay next to him, each looking more devastatingly beautiful than the other to Jamie at this current moment in time. The small pistol felt warm in his grip, so long had he held it clutched in his hand. The radio crackled dimly again, Jamie having turned the volume down as low as he could to protect his cover.

'This is alpha 9 checking in, sweep of rear barracks complete. Moving on to storage hangers now."

The voice, Sam, his only friend here, he was out here looking for him. The true reality hit Jamie harder than any truck full of explosives could off. Not that his friend was a part of his executioners, but that he truly accepted that he could never leave this place. He had been so willing to believe the Generals' words he had silenced his own. Screw him, he had something to finish, then he would leave by himself.

Moving over to the side of the roof, Jamie cautiously peered over the low wall, waiting for the patrol to arrive. In no time Sam and another recruit entered the main walkway between the four large warehouses arranged in a quad fashion. Each had an assault rifle, slung across their shoulders, but not raised at the present moment. Jamie delicately placed his sniper rifle on the wall, extending the bipod legs to improve his aim. Silently counting his breath he placed a single round into the upper leg of Sam's unknown accomplice. The wounded child staggered backward from the impact before collapsing to

the ground. Sam immediately swung his rifle to bare, but stopped when he saw Jamie approaching, unsure of what action to take.

"You're a bastard you know," he said quietly, checking his flanks before lowering his weapon.

"You realise what options you've given me?"

"I know."

"The hell you do!" Sam exclaimed, stepping forwards to confront Jamie.

"If I don't kill you they will! And if I kill youâ€|" he let the words trail, before looking up at Jamie.

"You didn't do this just to screw with me did you?" he asked, half curious, half knowing.

"No," Jamie said quietly.

"Well then come on, spill. I get seen with you and it's fastest finger first my friend."

Jamie smiled faintly at this; Sam always could put a humorous spin on the finer points of life.

"I need you to help me."

"Sure, anything," Sam replied automatically, stepping closer to Jamie.

After communicating his plan, the pair separated. This would be the last time Jamie saw his friend. Gripping arms they took a quiet moment to thank each other before heading off to complete their own separate tasks.

-

"Tell me boy, how many years have you been training here for now?"

"Six, Sir."

"That's right. And in that time you've learnt marksmanship, unarmed combat and strategic thinking. Tell me son, where the hell were your tactics tonight!"

Johns face was burning in rage, but his training had taught him to respect his superiors. He wasn't about to break his commander's neck, no matter how much he wanted to.

"You know what, I don't want to hear any of your excuses. If you radio in once more and say you haven't found him I'll find you myself. And it won't be pleasant. It is 0400 now Spartan, you have until daybreak at 0700, double time it!"

The General shoved his radio back into its belt holster so ferociously he missed the first time. One of the assigned Spartans saluted as he passed them in the corridors, heading towards his

office. The trainee looked almost as angry as him, but he had no care for their feelings at the present moment, if they failed it would be him on the chopping block come daybreak.

The General entered his room quickly, the darkness a relief to him. Lounging back in the leather chair, he let out a long breath. Sometimes he really hated his job. In the distance the faint crackle of the fire could be heard. That bastard child.

Sitting up straight, the Generals blood ran cold. He could hear the fire. Fourteen stories up, through soundproofed glass and he could hear the fire. The heavy blinds swayed in the breeze from the open window.

"You made it I see," he announced to the room.

"You doubted me?" a voice returned from the far corner.

"Never. I always knew you would die."

"I'm not dead."

"Yet."

"You have a ride for me I presume."

"Certainly. Let me get it fuelled and ready for you." The General stood from his chair, reaching for the intercom on his desk. Jamie stepped forwards from the shadows, his muddied face startling the larger man.

"I don't think so."

The General chuckled as though the near death of a twelve year old child was humorous to him.

"You wouldn't let me off this planet alive. You couldn't let me leave."

"How very right you are my boy. Tell me, how long did it take you to come to that conclusion."

"I saw through your lies as soon as you said them."

"Then why the charade!" he demanded indignantly, angered at the subordinates total lack of respect, "Why did you even agree to go through with this exercise if you knew it was futile."

"I had to get some things in order, but now I'm back to answer your original question."

"And enlighten me son, what was that?"

"You asked me what I was trying to achieve."

"And you said you just wanted peace. I remember."

"Yes, but not your definition of peace."

"And what, child, is my definition of peace."

"Your ideal of peace is one in which the citizens do what they are told and the endless war machine grinds on alongside everyday life."

"I would think that is most people's idea of peace."

"Not mine."

"What is your version then," the commander asked slowly, forgetting momentarily that this was a trainee who he should dam well execute on the spot.

"Peace is freedom."

"The people have freedom."

"Not us."

"You were conscripted."

"We were kidnapped!" Jamie screamed, his exhaustion making every syllable resonate in his chest.

The radio in his belt crackled, reporting a disturbance in the command centre, about to breach.

Jamie dove to the corner, and surfaced holding the sniper rifle, crouching on one knee. He waited, footsteps outside, then there was silence as his attackers slowed. Counting off the paces he fired a single shot through the thin door. Wood splintered and a grunt came from the other side before a dull thud sounded as a body fell to the ground. A moment later a second body crashed through the door, Fred roaring to avenge Kelly's quick exit from the race.

"You traitor!" he shrieked as he charged at the crouching child. He fired multiple rounds from his pistol, one tearing through the side of Jamie's stomach.

Jamie slung the rifle over his head as quickly as he could, snatching the rocket launcher from the floor before rolling out of the way of Fred's dive. With a last glance at the General he jumped bodily through the window.

-

"What do you mean he jumped! You're on the top floor of the god damned building. How did he escape!" John demanded into the radio.

"He had a rope," Fred returned.

"Then why didn't you follow?"

"He must of put a release lock on it, he took it down as soon as he descended."

"Did you see where he went?"

"Towards the main intelligence building."

"Good, Grace and Vinh can pick him up. Leave Kelly where she is and take the General to the brig. It's the most secure building here and I do not want him compromised again."

"Affirmative."

John swore as he pulled his radio from his mouth, everything was going to pieces. With the commander out of the way and most of the base staff evacuated because of the fire they had free reign now with Jamie. They would get him for sure this time.

"Vinh, any sign of him yet?"

"No sir," came the reply.

"Keep an eye out. But don't shoot. We are going to take the bastard down face to face."

"Happy hunting sir, we'll keep a lookout."

Replacing his radio John turned to his troops. Now would be their final glory hour.

"When we locate the target I want two teams to converge on him from separate directions. Target is armed and will not shoot to kill, so use that against him."

Grins went round the assembled group, over a hundred of them, all willing to kill one of their own so easily.

"Alpha One! Alpha One come in, we've spotted the target. Heading east towards the motor pool."

"Roger lookout, keep a tab on him."

Chambering a round in his pistol, John set off at a full run. Today would be a good day.

-

Jamie had spotted the two snipers easily from the top of the central command building earlier. The optical zoom on his own rifle had afforded him a close-up view of Grace and Vinh. He hadn't shot them though, he had to use them now, Fred and Kelly had interrupted his little conversation with the General as planned and he still had a few things left on his mind.

Seemingly out of ignorance he had passed through a bright patch of grass between two large light posts, giving his position away immediately to the snipers. He knew they wouldn't shoot at him, he still had Linda's radio and John's orders had been very specific on that topic.

Ducking back into the shadows he immediately backtracked on himself. John wasn't an idiot, but he was getting desperate. Jamie knew he would give everything he had now. And that meant he would leave the General with just Fred for protection.

-

"Alpha one, come in, urgent."

"This is alpha one, what is it Fred? This isn't the best moment."

"Scramble your frequency now Sir!"

John was momentarily puzzled before switching his radio to another setting on his radio while informing everyone else to do the same. After he did so Fred's voice buzzed forth.

"The general just told me something I think you should know. Jamie had a radio, locked into our frequency with the scramble code already in. You know what that means."

"Dam it. He's been listening in all night. And he must have gotten it off of Linda. I knew sending her out alone on that last pelican was a bad idea."

"What do you want to do Sir?"

"Where are you now Fred?"

"In the brig Sir, the General put up one hell of a fight but I got him here eventually."

"Oh no," John stammered, the realisation of his actions dawning on him.

"What Sir?" Fred asked quickly, unnerved by his commanders actions.

"He was listening in the whole time. Fred getâ€|"

From the other end of the line Fred's voice rang out before been silenced. John gripped his radio in a white knuckled fist before dashing off back the way he had just come. His fellow Spartans looked on at him but he just ran, the cold night air suddenly chilling him.

"Hello again Sir," Jamie said, slowly approaching the cell that Fred had locked the General in. Placing his rifle on the ground next to Fred's sleeping body he reached down and retrieved the keys to the cell. He had left the rocket launcher by the door, where he had shot Fred from. He had been too distracted on his radio to notice the small barrel peeking around the corner.

The General looked wild, caged within his own prison walls. His face flitted between anger, fear and pleading. He truly was a worthless piece of meat.

"Jamie, I can let you leave. The original deal still stands. You go and never talk of this place and we all live happily."

Jamie tutted slowly, pulling out the smooth metal pistol from his pocket. The General visibly flinched. He had been in three major conflicts and yet the sight of a small child with a gun scared him

worse than any fanatical nut strapped with explosives.

"You should of realised by now I could have escaped. I mean I got into here no trouble. No, you see as soon as I got in the air I would be shot down. I could never leave here."

"Then what do you want!" the General pleaded.

"Peace. Like I said."

"But what peace?"

"Freedom. And that means this place has to go."

"What?"

"Put the gun down Jamie."

"Hello John, welcome to my leaving party."

"Put it down, or I blow you to hell."

Turning around Jamie saw John, his face an angry mask of adolescent rage. Over one shoulder he hefted the loaded rocket launcher.

"General, step back to the far corner and use the bed for cover."

"Why not just use a rifle?" Jamie asked innocently, his own weapon hanging by his side.

"I felt like using a cannon on a mosquito."

"You know I'm not going to give up now John."

"I was kinda hoping for that answer."

"Good," Jamie replied.

"You know what they say about natural selection and all," John stated, training the rocket launcher on him.

Jamie grinned, looking down at his small weapon before replying, "Yeah, it went out the window when we learned to walk and talk."

John depressed the trigger on the launcher.

The rocket within began moving, its propellant gasses jetting out the rear of the tube.

The explosive charge shot forward, before hitting an obstruction halfway along the cylinder.

Detecting an impact it detonated.

John's body was instantly thrown aside from the explosion. His head vanished in a ball of flame before his upper body followed.

The concussion wave blew Jamie back against the bars, the General protected by the flimsy mattress.

Jamie slowly stood to his feet. John was an arrogant fool, the tampered device had worked perfectly.

"You weren't the brightest John," Jamie said, picking pieces of burnt flesh from his face.

"And now for you," he said, opening the door to the Generals' cell.

"Sir!" multiple Spartans rushed into the room, each training their rifles on Jamie. But they wouldn't fire, not with a weapon held against their superior commanders' skull.

"What now Jamie?" he asked, relieved at the sudden rush of support.

"Now," he said, bringing a small black device from his pocket, "We are free."

"But what about going home, your parents?" the General finally pleaded

"That's all taken care off."

"Butâ€| "

Jamie pressed the button on the device and he was finally at peace.

Sam watched the scene unfold around him, reports were coming in, Jamie was at the brig, he had taken the General hostage. Then the chatter became more frantic, John had been killed, an explosion had echoed throughout the desolate compound. That was Sam's signal. Now was the time to soar.

Starting up the longsword he was sitting in he knew this would be close. Jamie had been very brief on his details, but when he mentioned a nuke Sam had perked up. He knew the base held such powerful weapons of destruction, but he never assumed Jamie would use one. His trip to the Generals office had served two purposes, to frighten the General into running and also to retrieve the launch codes for a HAVOK tactical nuke.

And now, with the death of John 117, it would only be a matter of minutes until Jamie detonated the weapon. The twin engines roared to life, the ship picking up speed at an incredible speed. He furiously wrestled with the controls, unfamiliar with flying in general. It was a miracle he had even got into the air. He left atmosphere within thirty seconds, ten seconds later the stars were eclipsed by the brightest flash of light he had seen. Then they faded away and Sam was in orbit around the planet.

He had to be quick, Reach was a busy place to hang around and it would only get more frantic after what had just transpired. Setting in the co-ordinates Jamie had given him he engaged the Shaw-Fukikawa

slipspace engines and vanished from sight and history. It would take a few weeks to arrive at his destination, but Sam was in no rush. He just hoped the vessel was up to the journey.

4. IV

Well this is it, the final chapter. A pretty short story in all, but I wanted it to be that way. A few twists here and I'm still not sure about the ending even after rewriting it seven times over four months. Anyway, enjoy.

Harsh Grip

Sam finished telling his story. Ray Calloway sat back on the old sofa in the older house. The man looked shattered, both physically and emotionally. All hope had gone from his eyes, all possibility for a true future taken, just like his child. Sam wished at that moment he had died in the explosion rather than have to tell this poor man his son was dead again.

Shaking, Ray slowly stood from the sofa, moving towards the kitchen, passing Sam on the way. He placed a trembling hand on the boy's shoulder and thanked him for telling him the truth.

Sitting down on a hard backed chair, Sam watched the small television in the corner, listening to the wind and rain lash the building outside. A small mantelpiece arched over an unused fire. Glancing over the pictures strewn on top Sam saw a happy family. Husband, wife and beaming son. They all looked so peaceful. Looking again at the pictures, Sam felt something twinge within him, like a deep nagging thought pushing to burst through his conscious mind at any moment if only he could define it well enough.

Stepping towards the fireplace Sam looked over the pictures again. No. They must have been old, Jamie had been gone six years of course. But looking again Sam couldn't deny it. The father in all the pictures had the deepest brown eyes, just like his son. But the man, the one he had been with for the past few hours, he hadâ€!

"We were so happy back then," a voice announced from the doorway to the kitchen.

Sam spun around, his palms sweaty, as though he had been caught in the act of stealing something from the man. He stepped away from the fireplace, his wary attitude surprising the man.

"What's wrong?" he asked quickly, stepping forwards. He held two steaming cups in his hands.

"Nâ€! Nothing," Sam hurriedly said, his mind racing to keep up with the situation. He had left his weapon on the small sideboard beside the kitchen door, glancing at it now the man followed his gaze.

"Oh, don't worry, I don't even know how to use those things," he said, trying to smile humorously.

Smiling back, Sam couldn't help but concentrate on the shining green eyes staring back at him. Jamie had always said his father was a gun nut, he took him out deer hunting when he was only five to get him

started early he had said.

"Jamie used to say he loved playing out on the creek bed in Summer with his friends. Aliens and marines and all that stuff," Sam tested.

"Oh yeah, he would be out all day," Ray replied to Sam's fake memory, "he would only come back when his mother told him it was supper. Speaking of which, here's a nice hot cuppa for you, should warm you up."

Sam cautiously took the drink from the man, he couldn't let his nerves show, not if this man wasn't who he said he was.

"You know, you should stay here tonight. I'll call the sheriff tomorrow and he can figure out what to do."

Sam just nodded absently, where was the real Ray Calloway? He had to find him.

"Can I use your bathroom please?" he asked quickly, placing his cup down on the table.

"Sure, just upstairs, you can't miss it."

Sam sprang up the stairs, he had to be quick. The toilet was directly opposite the stairs, but he merely pulled the door too. There were three other rooms on this floor, two bedrooms and a small storage closet. The master bedroom was empty, but in the smaller room Sam found a sleeping Ray Calloway hidden under a blanket in the far corner.

Kneeling before him he gently shook the man, trying to awaken him but he didn't even moan in his sleep.

"He won't wake."

The voice startled Sam, he hadn't even heard the man coming. That meant he had to have been trained; well. And that meant he had a problem.

"Who are you?" he asked, the question pointless, he would never get a name.

"I take care of problems. Like the one you and your friend caused. I would have thought you'd be smarter. You should know how easy it is to track objects through slipspace."

"You heard what they were doing to us, surely you have to care."

"It is not my concern what has happened to you in the past, only what happens to you from now on."

"I won't leave," Sam stated stubbornly, even as he tried to figure out any way to escape the situation.

"If you come with me now, I will let this man live. In the morning he will wake up with a headache on his couch none the wiser. If you refuse, wellâ€"

He slipped a silenced pistol from a hidden holster on his back and sighted in upon the real Ray Calloway's head.

"You can't do this!" Sam spat at the man.

"Oh I don't know. A boy crashes in a ship, threatens a man with a gun and then the person he is looking for is found dead the very next day. It seems like an open and shut case to me."

"And what happens to me?" Sam asked slowly, hope dwindling before him.

"You were overwhelmed and took off into the night before finally releasing yourself off your troubles."

"Suicide," Sam said bluntly.

"Precisely. You can save a life tonight child, all you have to do is sacrifice your own."

"I'm sorry, all I've been trained to do is take life."

He sprang, the strength burst forth from his legs, years of tough physical training had given him extraordinary speed. He smashed the small bed before him forwards, violently knocking the gun out of the mans hand. Not stopping he used his shoulders to ram the bed forwards, crushing the intruder against the wall. He stooped quickly and snatched the weapon from the floor. Holding it against the back of the mattress he emptied the entire clip into the soft material. The red stain blossomed before Sam let the bed frame fall. The agent collapsed to the ground, his chest a patchwork of bullet holes and seeping red blood.

Dropping the gun to the ground, Sam returned to Jamie's father. He would wake in a few hours, and then Sam would have to tell his story all over again.

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Ray Calloway sat back on the sofa, clutching his wife to his chest. They sat together for the longest time before, finally turning to face the child across from them.

"They really did this to you? All of what you said is true?" he asked slowly.

"Every word Sir, the man in your upstairs bedroom should be proof enough of that."

"Then our son, Jamie, he's reallyâ€|" he let the sentence hang before clutching his wife again. She hadn't said anything since coming home to find her husband with a strange child. But now she looked towards Sam and smiled at him, her first true smile for six years.

"Thank you," she nearly whispered, her eyes sore and bloodshot from the tears she had shed in such a short amount of time, "thank you for telling us what happened to our child."

"I'm sorry I couldn't save him for you mamm, I, I tried begging him to reconsider, but he said it was the only way he could stop them and

protect you."

"It's alright son, we don't blame you," Ray said slowly, reaching across to pat the child on his shoulder.

Sam slowly stood, walking back out towards the kitchen, picking up his pistol on his way out.

"Where are you going?" the man asked quickly, standing from his seat.

"I've done what your son asked of me Sir, now I have to leave."

"Where are you going? Where does your family live? We can help you get there."

"My family is dead Sir, I came from an orphanage and I am not going back there."

"Well then where will you go? Please, let us help you, it is the least we can do."

"Iâ€| I don't know where I'm going to go." Thinking on it now, Sam realised he hadn't put much thought into what he would do after leaving. Now that realisation felt like a major omission on his part. How foolish could he have been, so short-sighted he had only seen what Jamie had asked him to do.

"Please, stay with us, for a while at least. You look like you've been through the wars. We won't say anything about your past I swear."

"Butâ€| but I, your son is dead because of me," Sam stammered.

"Nonsense, those bastards killed him and the only reason we know the truth is because of you."

"But, I would remind you of your son, you don't want me here Sir."

"Everyone deserves a home Sam, please, you could never replace Jamie but his memory lives on in you," Melissa had risen from the sofa to stand beside her husband, "Stay here Sam."

"Thank you," he finally whispered.

It took many months to get used to normal life again, but Sam was thankful for every day he spent with these wonderful people. Six months after deciding to stay the official adoption papers were signed and Samuel Becker became Samuel Calloway.

End
file.